
The Clash between Oil and the Future

Dr. Alan K. Betts

Global ocean temperatures set a new record in 2018, beating the previous record set in 2017. New studies show that both the Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets are melting faster than ever, so that sea-level rise is accelerating. In the third week of January, the weakening polar vortex gave us bitter cold weather and heavy snow (and as I write more is falling). However, our spinach and lettuce in cold-frames are doing fine, as the snow cover has protected them.

That's the real world. But here in the U.S., the new surreal world continues. I remarked last month that the President refused to read the fourth National Climate Assessment mapping out how bad climate change will be for the U.S. if we stay on our present fossil fuel energy system. The EPA head also said he was too busy to read this report, which his own agency helped produce. His extraordinary excuse was that much of the science in the report came from the time of the Obama presidency. Am I to suppose by implication that the next NCA report will be filled with Trump science?



Pumping oil. Image: mexicinstitute.wordpress.com

The Federal government shutdown affected a lot of government science along with so many other “non-essential” government branches. Science is considered worse than non-essential, because much is incompatible with right-wing doctrine. The shutdown prevented the weather service from upgrading models and updating codes to receive all 2019 global data. It prevented many scientists from reviewing recent climate data. Slowly but surely, government by ideology and blackmail is pushing the U.S. into third-world status.

Both snow and missing data have meant that I have had time to read and think deeply. Reading the extraordinary book, “Oil, Power and War” by French author Matthieu Auzanneau, has given me a new global perspective on how our dependence on oil has led to far-reaching conflicts over the past century. I learnt a lot about the central role of oil in warfare – and the millions that have suffered and died for oil. The U.S. military and economic dominance has been closely tied to the control and access to global oil supplies. This still continues in the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East, and the latest struggle to regain control of the large Venezuelan oil reserves.

I thought I was well-informed, but now I realize the immense secret power of the U.S. oil monopolies has ruled government policy for the past century, rather than the reverse. In parallel to the military role of oil, the rapid material growth of the U.S. economy in the decades after World War II was also enabled by the U.S. global control of cheap oil supplies. Remember the magnificent icon of our growth and prosperity was the gas-hungry 1950s V8 Cadillac with fins.

But because we refuse to make the transition from oil, the crash is coming closer. In a tragic microcosm across the border in Mexico, people risk their lives by tapping pipelines for gasoline. The poor are desperate for fuels, and it is a \$3 billion-a-year business for organized thieves.

I see much more clearly how accelerating climate change is linked to the power of oil in both our industrial society and our military dominance. The EPA has recently been told to roll back efficiency standards for cars once again to keep us trapped in this spiral of demand driving supply that is profitable for the oil industry. Right now the U.S. has record oil production, but we ignore the fact that in a decade or so, when this shale oil extraction peaks and the crash comes, the climate impacts will be irreversible.

Yet plug-in hybrid cars can right now deliver an 80% reduction in gasoline use, with large savings in fuel and maintenance costs to the owners, large gains for the climate, and a smooth transition away from oil. However, both society and the automobile industry are reluctant to really market them, because oil consumption and inefficiency control policy.

But shifting back to the renewable world, Vermonters are starting to tap trees for maple syrup as they have done for centuries, and soon we will be eating fresh spinach again.

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